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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

24 July 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Political Improvement in Cambodia,  
Obstacles and Possibilities

1. Current Trends and the Present Situation. The Phnom Penh government's fortunes and the overall non-Communist position in Cambodia have deteriorated steadily over the past several months. Indeed, this decline has been continuous ever since the ill-fated Chenla II Campaign in the fall of 1971. Psychologically, the FANK has never really recovered from the drubbing the North Vietnamese Army gave its units in those 1971 battles along Route 6. From that time forward, the initiative has passed increasingly to the Communists, despite the fact that after Chenla II, the North Vietnamese turned over a progressively increasing share of combat responsibilities to their clients and, initially, pupils -- the Khmer Insurgents -- who now do most of the fighting. Although heavily outnumbered by the FANK, the Khmer Insurgents now clearly have the strategic initiative. They harass all the major lines of internal communication, and from time to time close each of them. The Insurgents control much of the countryside, and are mounting increasing pressure on Phnom Penh itself.

2. To date, the Phnom Penh Government (the GKR) has shown no sign of any ability to reverse this situation -- again, despite the fact that the combat force theoretically at its disposal is at least twice and probably three times larger than the Insurgents' combat strength. Even with the massive U.S. air effort now in train, the GKR's prospects for survival are not bright. If that air effort terminates on 15 August, further deterioration in the GKR's position seems certain -- and if even the current level of Insurgent pressure continues, the spectre of unravelling collapse is inescapably real.

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3. Continuing or increased U.S. assistance to the GKR might slow the rate of decay, but hardware and material aid do not of themselves affect and cannot offset the major obstacle to improvement: the Phnom Penh government's inability to pull itself together and use the physical assets it already possesses. This -- not hardware or other forms of quantifiable assistance -- is the central issue. Unless or until the GKR can start functioning as a government, there is little hope for any significant improvement in its position -- no matter what additional assistance the U.S. provides.

4. On the basis of the record of the past twenty months, it is as certain as anything in Indochina ever is or can be that there is no prospect of the GKR's beginning to function in this fashion so long as Lon Nol remains physically present in Cambodia. His whole behavior pattern, at least since his stroke on 8 February 1971, has been one of unwillingness -- or inability -- to manage the affairs of state, coupled with a concomitant unwillingness to let anyone else do so, or even try. His periodic retreat into a private world of congenial fantasy, his erratic meddling in the activities of his major subordinates, and his consistent refusal to delegate meaningful authority to others in the government have served to negate much of the value of U.S. support. Lon Nol's behavior patterns -- his arbitrary movement of units on personal whim and order, without informing (let alone consulting) his field commanders or general staff -- were major causal contributors to the debacle of Chenla II. There is no practical likelihood that Lon Nol will alter his pattern of behavior. This situation is not going to get better. If his brother Lon Non should return to Cambodia -- and there are indications that Lon Nol is considering this -- it will get worse.

5. Given the present parlous state of affairs in Cambodia, the real problem -- if improvement in the GKR's position and prospects is desired -- is not how much additional U.S. assistance can be provided but how Lon Nol's departure -- i.e., physical absence from the country -- can be arranged without destroying what little vitality remains within the government. This is not a question of deposition or ouster (though it could come to that), but a question of getting him to leave the country physically, retaining his title of Chief of State -- and hence the form of the current GKR -- but giving de facto "temporary" control to those who may be able to govern in a way that he, demonstrably, cannot.

6. 1963 and 1973 -- the Non-Parallel. One ghost that bedevils discussion of the above approach is the events of 1963 in South Vietnam. Whether the U.S. instigated and/or caused Diem's overthrow in 1963 or whether some Vietnamese (non-Communist) group would have inevitably overthrown him

no matter what the U.S. did is something that will long be legitimately -- and passionately -- debated. Whatever the merits of these arguments about South Vietnam in 1963, they have no relevance to Cambodia in 1973. The two situations are not analogues and the course of action here envisaged with respect to Lon Nol is in no material respect parallel to the course of events that ended Diem's regime and life. Thus, the post November 1963 pattern of events in South Vietnam does not provide relevant arguments for or against encouraging Lon Nol's physical absence from the Cambodian scene.

7. Necessary Versus Sufficient Conditions for Improvement. Lon Nol's physical absence would not be any panacea or guarantee of improvement. There is no assurance that the three remaining High Council Members would be galvanized into facing Cambodia's many problems cooperatively or effectively. Though they seem more realistically aware than Lon Nol of Cambodia's perilous situation, and though the GKR was better run while Lon Nol was in Tripler Hospital recovering from his stroke than it ever has been while he was in Cambodia, Sirik Matak, In Tam, and Cheng Heng have not demonstrated any great ability to work together for common national goals. They have all engaged in carping about Lon Nol's shortcomings and in maneuvering against him and each other. If Lon Nol were to depart, they might not rise above their petty rivalries and backbiting. Furthermore, with Lon Nol gone, there would be an increased risk of a coup attempt against the remaining leadership, possibly with one or more members of the High Council cooperating or participating.

8. In short, Lon Nol's departure -- by itself -- is clearly not a sufficient condition for improvement in the GKR's position and prospects. From the pattern of the past two years, however, it can be persuasively argued that it is a necessary condition. If Lon Nol remains, the realistic prospects for improvement are virtually nil and further U.S. aid would probably be wasted. If he leaves -- physically, not titularly -- there is some chance of improvement, some room for maneuver and some likelihood that the right mix of U.S. aid and counsel could make a difference.

9. The Time Factor. With 15 August fast approaching, the hour is clearly late and the time short for improvement of much real consequence in a negotiating arena. It could be -- and is -- argued that given the time element, the risks involved in pressuring Lon Nol to leave are not worth the unprovable possibility of improvement if he goes. This is a legitimate argument not easy to counter. What the U.S. is faced with is the virtual certainty of a progressive deterioration in the Phnom Penh government's position and capabilities if Lon Nol

remains -- no matter what material assistance the GKR is provided -- versus the unquantifiable possibility of improvement if he is successfully encouraged to depart.

10. The Negotiating Chip. Sihanouk and the Khmer Communists have insisted that Lon Nol's ouster is an indispensable precondition to any settlement and (sometimes) any serious negotiations. It can be argued that if he physically leaves Cambodia, his "trade off" value is thereby automatically discounted. In our opinion, however, it can be more plausibly argued that he is easier for the Cambodians -- or the U.S. -- to use as a bargaining chip if he retains his titular authority but is not physically present in Cambodia.

11. The Mechanics. If the decision is made to try, getting Lon Nol to leave Cambodia will probably not be easy to achieve. Though he has often discussed the possibility of leaving for medical treatment, he has shied away from firm dates, let alone an actual departure. In a recent conversation with Ambassador Swank, he said that if the U.S. were engaged in serious negotiations on Cambodia and had to deal him off, he would acquiesce. But he claims to be worried about the timing of his departure and insists he does not want to appear to be leaving out of cowardice or as a result of U.S. pressure. These feelings are probably genuine, but another -- unstated but probably even more important -- reason for Lon Nol's reluctance to leave is almost certainly a feeling that if he leaves Cambodia, his chances of ever returning to function as Chief of State are very low.

12. Despite Lon Nol's reservations and belief that further medical treatment is not urgently mandatory "at this time," the medical rationale still is the best and most face-saving line of approach. Lon Nol has had a stroke, still shows its after effects and does have a medical problem. This is a well-known fact and so is his legitimate concern about his health. Hence the argument can be plausibly used with him -- and by him -- that diagnostic therapy of a kind not available in Phnom Penh is essential to protect and preserve his health, to minimize the risk of his collapsing, or even dying, when the country needs him. The pitch, and pretext, could be that he owes it to Cambodia and himself to get himself in the best possible condition for the arduous period ahead.

13. We are not suggesting that Lon Nol should undergo any operation or surgical procedure -- particularly a still experimental and dangerous one such as Dr. Cooper's -- that qualified doctors do not honestly believe, in their best professional judgment, to be clinically indicated. We are

suggesting that Lon Nol be induced to come to the U.S. for a thorough examination, diagnosis, rest and (at a minimum) non-surgical therapy. The time frame "required" for this process should be sufficiently open ended so that he will have to delegate his authority to an interim executive, i.e., the remaining three members of the High Council.

14. The medical pitch could be complemented and reinforced by a suggestion that Lon Nol is also needed abroad to offset personally Sihanouk's ongoing diplomatic offensive. This could include his visiting several capitals and going to the UN to personally present Cambodia's case before the world. Thus, the overall pitch could be a diplomatic journey interspersed with a period of rest and diagnostic therapy.

15. The past several weeks and months indicate that Lon Nol will not be moved by gentle or oblique Ambassadorial suggestions. He will have to be told, politely but forcefully, that it is essential to Cambodia's future and the success of any possible negotiations for him to stop playing Russian roulette with his health by trying to carry on under the strains and stress of wartime leadership and come immediately for the recuperative therapy and diagnosis which can prevent or reduce the chances of another medical crisis occurring, rather than plough ahead in Phnom Penh and risk having such a crisis suddenly occur at the worst possible moment.

16. To avoid the inevitably high visibility, and attendant publicity, of a special emissary, it would probably be best for this pitch to be made by Ambassador Swank, buttressed by a compassionate but firm letter from President Nixon. The latter, of course, could express extreme solicitude and convey ego flattering gestures such as an invitation to a weekend at Camp David where President Nixon could have the benefit of Lon Nol's counsel on our common problems in Cambodia, etc. Ambassador Swank could pick up the theme of his last conversation and Lon Nol's indication of a willingness to be guided by Washington's advice. Beneath the sugar coating, however, the message would have to be unambiguous and firm: that we consider it essential for Lon Nol to come for diagnostic treatment and begin his diplomatic journeys immediately. If Ambassador Swank's approach is rebuffed, then a high level emissary from Washington should be dispatched to convey the message in even stronger terms.

17. The Options. In the current situation in Cambodia, time is short and our basic options boil down to two, neither very promising. We can either:

a. Do nothing further about Lon Nol, in which case continued deterioration in the Phnom Penh government's viability, prospects and negotiating position is virtually assured -- almost regardless of any material assistance the U.S. provides, or

b. Induce Lon Nol to leave, an action that may not improve the situation but which would remove a major obstacle to progress. With that obstacle absent, there is some chance that political strength and viability can be improved, that the assets the GKR already has can be used to better effect, and that additional aid could have some value. Also, with Lon Nol absent, his caretaker successors can undertake credible negotiating initiatives that cannot -- and will not -- be tried so long as he remains physically present in Cambodia.